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Life is Beautiful: Gay Representation and Television Drama Beyond Hallyu

Basil Glynn and Jeongmee Kim

The term Hallyu in Korea is commonly used to describe cultural products that have enjoyed success outside of Korea and achieved an overseas viewership (in the case of film and television) or listenership (in the case of Korean pop music, or K-pop).¹ Hallyu drama (or Korean Wave drama as it is also commonly called) has been hugely popular since the early 2000s throughout East Asia and beyond in regions as diverse as South America, Africa, India and the Middle East. The drama Jewel in the Palace (a.k.a. Dae Jang Geum MBC 2003-4), for example, has been watched in over 90 countries and continues to prove popular in new territories, with Pakistan Television (PTV) broadcasting it for the first time in January 2016 (Aijaz). Despite Hallyu drama's widespread appeal and global success, however, the critical discussions that have arisen around this worldwide phenomenon have until recently remained focused on the importance of the Korean Wave primarily within East Asia; how it has served to reveal and cater to attitudes found in East Asian populations, and subsequently, to highlight inter-Asia issues such as living with Confucianism, comprehending the region's continued modernization, and coming to terms with a broadening sense of Asian identity.²

Korean dramas that have been most widely discussed (whether in relation to their impact in Asia or, more recently, non-Asian countries), especially in the English language, have tended to be Hallyu ones, largely because these are the ones most viewed and hence best known outside of Korea as well as being the ones most celebrated within Korea for achieving success abroad.³ The critical attention devoted to series such as Winter Sonata (2002, KBS)⁴ and Boys Over Flowers (2009, KBS),⁵ for instance, has generally focused upon their impact and/or reception in various Asian countries. While providing fascinating insights and some wonderful writing and analysis, this critical tendency has provided a somewhat skewed

impression of what Korean drama constitutes. As a result, the dramas receiving the most critical attention have generally been those designed to appeal to a wide range of audiences and have been “uncritical,” largely apolitical and uncontroversial, centering as they have upon narratives of romance, family and/or work with little commentary offered on Korea itself. In fact, lack of engagement with contentious aspects of Korean ideology or burning social issues is a common characteristic of the Korean Hallyu television drama export formula, with Korea recurrently presented for foreign consumption as an unthreatening, trendsetting modern country with decent, conservative standards and traditions in little need of change. It is a sanitized image of Korea that has been globally exported and thus globally discussed.

In regards to television drama and music the term Hallyu outside of Korea serves as a form of brand description that often signifies, in addition to the country of origin, “safe” and palatable content.⁶ Hallyu music videos, for instance, regularly feature good looking, expertly choreographed, energetic and youthful boy and girl bands which Jay Rayner aptly describes as “highly innocuous” and “calibrated to offend as few people as possible” (12). A similar inoffensiveness is also part of the international appeal of Hallyu drama which, as a “made in Korea” brand, conjures its own recurring images, this time of romantic, good looking and exceptionally well-attired male and female protagonists, beautiful apartments and scenic backdrops with dutiful sons and daughters living sexless lives in romantic quests for heterosexual love. In order to determine what appeals and matters to Asian audiences, or as Cho phrases it, “to illuminate current structures of feeling” (397), borrowing - or rather Asianizing - Raymond Williams’s famous concept (1961, 1977), whereby critical attention has largely focused upon the pleasingly composed and commercially successful images of “Korea” that Hallyu drama projects. As a result, critical practice has tended to replicate

Hallyu's own prioritization of the internationally profitable, appealing and engaging creative content.

In addition to financial return, many positive benefits have been attributed to Hallyu drama's glossy and unoffending content, including how it is helping to greatly improve the image of Korea abroad.⁷ More broadly it is also supposedly contributing to the shaping of "the East Asian cultural imagination" (Keane, Fung, Moran 4) and "transnational imaginary space" (Dong-Hoo Lee 171). By way of contrast, innovative and controversial dramas that have attempted to tackle difficult or taboo subject matter or criticize widely held attitudes and beliefs in Korean society have barely appeared in English language analysis. Because they have not being widely exported or made profitable overseas, such dramas have remained outside of the Hallyu critical canon as they have been of little relevance when constructing narratives that attempt to account for why Korean drama has become so internationally significant. As exceptions tend to be excluded when one is looking for rules or trends, the critical analysis of Hallyu drama has commonly searched for repeated elements and these have then been examined and re-examined in order to determine the recipe for Hallyu's international success. Constituent elements have been identified as a "blend of (often surgically enhanced) good looks ... [and a] ... lack of profanity and sex – as befitting Confucian morals" (Maliangkay 15), a sympathetic depiction of extended family relationships (Creighton 20), a portrayal of "luxurious cosmopolitan city life" (Jung 74) and so on. Yet dramas that have not exported well, regardless of their experimental or innovative aspects, have been largely disregarded primarily because they have not played a fundamental part in the bigger picture of Hallyu's international success or its transnational commercial legitimacy.

As other articles in this special issue also point out, sectors of the Korean creative industries have in the past and continue now to engage with their social and cultural

environment. Politically charged, countercultural or just distinctive and/or original, cultural artefacts have been and continue to be born out of a desire to be creative, to comment on or to create social change. This article focuses upon one such overlooked drama, the audacious and genuinely groundbreaking Life is Beautiful (SBS 2010), which motivated an immense amount of critical and social reaction within Korea and yet has barely been featured in English language analysis of Korean drama. This is in spite of it being a finely produced and performed series and one written by the most prolific, longest serving and commercially successful of all Korean writers of Hallyu drama, Kim Soo-hyeon. Life is Beautiful is a very important television series in the career of this immensely influential writer and so it would seem worthy of greater consideration than it has hitherto received, particularly when one considers the fact that her drama, What Is Love? (1991, MBC), has been credited with being the work that initiated the Hallyu phenomenon in the first place following its broadcast on Chinese Central Television (CCTV) in 1997 and its subsequent rebroadcast on other Chinese networks (Shim 25). After this “huge hit” (Jung 73) managed to accrue “the highest rating (4.3 percent) among foreign television programmes imported to China ... the term [Hallyu] entered the East Asian vernacular” (Han 25).⁸

In addition to its impressive production credentials, Life is Beautiful is also notable for being hugely controversial at the time of its broadcast due to its boldness in tackling the subject of homosexuality and Korean prejudice towards it over the course of its 63 episodes.⁹ Confronting such sensitive issues meant difficulty for the drama to be marketed in East Asia’s “transnational imaginary space” where, as Diana Khor and Saori Kamano point out, lesbians and gay men still live in climates of discrimination, hostility and ignorance in various East Asian countries where their sexuality is habitually kept “invisible,” “hidden” or “silenced” (3-4). Similar attitudes also exist in Korea where Seo Dong-Jin, an openly gay cultural critic, has argued that the existence of homosexuality is so marginalized that it

essentially “does not have any social existence. In public discourse aimed at forming the laws and regulations governing Korean society, homosexuality is not mentioned ... Homosexuals are not seen as representing members of society who can exercise the power to effect social changes. In other words, their existence is ignored” (66-7). Today, as Joseph Yi and Joe Phillips assert, Korean LGBT citizens are an oppressed minority left without social acceptance, legal protection, or any meaningful public space for expressing their sexual identity.

Life is Beautiful was the series that brought the “ignored” issue of homosexuality dramatically front and centre and did so at an important moment when laws and regulations were being drafted that would directly impact upon Korea’s gay population. In the midst of an intense national public debate that occurred in 2010 over whether gay rights were acceptable in Korean society and public life, the drama adopted a clear sociopolitical position that was antipathetic to offering the usual idealised or romanticised “marketing” of Korea, which has been central to Hallyu’s international appeal.

Following a recommendation from the United Nations Human Rights Council, which criticized evident discrimination against Korea’s gay minority, the Korean government began drafting an Equal Opportunities Act in 2007. In April 2010 the press reported that the Ministry of Justice had set-up a special sub-committee to discuss the Act, followed by claims that the Ministry was about to recommend passing the act in November. This met with furious opposition, especially from Christian lobby groups who particularly objected to the promotion of homosexuality that they perceived the act would allow (The Hankyoreh 29 October 2010). In the face of growing pressure, the Ministry withdrew its recommendation in January 2011. In 2013, the act was brought before parliament once more but again, following strong reaction from lobby groups, it was withdrawn. To this date, the act has not been passed in Korea.

Remarkably, in the midst of these events, Life is Beautiful over several months presented weekly depictions of the lives of two professional, handsome and kindhearted homosexual men in a loving relationship. It portrayed these gay characters within an otherwise traditional Korean family melodrama centrally concerned with the everyday trials and tribulations of a Korean household and its focus remained throughout on inter-personal relationships and family dynamics. Tae-sup, the eldest son of the Yang family whom the drama is about, and Kyung-soo, his partner, are conventional Hallyu leading men in that they are good looking, hard-working, fashionably dressed dutiful sons working in professional jobs. They, like other male heroes of Hallyu drama, strive to secure better futures and find lasting romantic love. Through them finding this future and this love with each other, however, Kim Soo-hyeon tackled head on the issue of whether gay central characters should be included in mainstream television drama at a time when it was being publically debated whether they should remain excluded from mainstream Korean life. Over several months her long and winding family saga expertly offered, in addition to the characters' stories, a counter-narrative that challenged Korean social values.

Life is Beautiful was broadcast in Korea every Saturday and Sunday in a late night slot of 10 - 11.10 p.m. between 20th March and 7th November 2010. Unusually, the series was not set on the mainland in a large city like Seoul, but instead took place on Jeju Island, which lies just off the south coast of the Korean Peninsula and has long been the country's most famous domestic holiday destination. Within the drama it serves as a place of refuge for the central characters who have either fled or can no longer live their lives on the Korean mainland. Byung-tae, the father of the Yang family, was once a civil servant but due to failing health came to the island and opened a small Bed and Breakfast business. Min-jae, his wife, did not know her first husband was already married when she wed him. Upon finding out that he was a bigamist, she left for Jeju to make a new life for herself. Tae-sup, their son,

studied in Seoul but returned to Jeju to be a doctor whilst his boyfriend, Kyung-soo, had a wife and child in Seoul before banishing himself to Jeju for the sake of his family after coming out and getting divorced. In a brief semi-comical vignette, the family's aged grandparents are featured having a brief and disastrous trip to Seoul (see episode 33), underlining once and for all that the city is no place for this particular family.

The island of Jeju is therefore both an actual and symbolic setting for a family exiled from mainland Korea and, in the case of Tae-sup and Kyung-soo, from mainstream Korean drama as well. In the drama it is a place of newfound possibilities as well for people who have, one way or another, chosen a different way of life from those on the mainland. The rural setting and the sea offer a picturesque alternative to the hustle and bustle of modern urban living whilst the solitude and the expansive space also allow for alternative family structures and relationships to prosper. The Yang family is a highly unconventional family unit as both parents are in their second marriage and both have brought a child from a previous marriage to join their new family. Both of the father's older brothers, Byung-joon and Byung-keol, live in the Yang's household and are unmarried, despite being in their mid-forties. Grandparents live there also and the mother's eldest daughter from her previous marriage, Ji-hye also resides there with her own new family consisting of a husband and daughter. They all enjoy a form of communal living in a spacious house with large grounds that would be unfeasible in the apartment living of urban Seoul.

The drama sidelines Asian modernity and cosmopolitan city life by being set geographically outside of modern Korea and problematizes other common elements of the Hallyu formula as well such as the depiction of Confucian values habitually taken for granted. Kim Soo-hyeon champions progressive and modern beliefs over the traditional ones repeatedly extolled in international hit dramas like Autumn in My Heart (KBS 2000) and Winter Sonata. Far from being a vehicle for promoting Korean "soft power," "Korea,

Sparkling,” “Korea Inspiring” or “Dynamic Korea,”¹⁰ slogans and catchphrases referred to routinely in governmental and media discussions of Hallyu, Kim’s drama presented a Korea lacking in dynamism and “uninspiring” in its inability to move on from the past and engage with the present.

To put the boldness of Kim Soo-hyeon’s decision to offer weekly depictions of sympathetic and immensely likeable gay characters into context, it is worth noting how the subject of homosexuality has barely featured in Korean drama and how, when it has, it has tended to be either inadequately presented and/or vehemently objected to. Single plays or two-part dramas have, rarely, depicted gay characters such as in Sad Temptation (KBS) which aired on 26th December 1999, but as the title of this drama suggests, being gay has tended to be presented as a wretched state of being and worthy of pity, like an affliction. Otherwise, as Hong Ji-a argues using The 1st Shop of Coffee Prince (MBC 2007) as an example, being gay has been depicted as bereft of the possibility of consummation due to its hyper-romanticized presentation, belonging to the realms of the imagination and fantasy rather than the physical world of the here and now. As in to Hong’s example, in November 2010, just after Life is Beautiful ended, the drama series Secret Garden (SBS) featured an openly gay secondary character (Sun) who has a crush on one of the central characters (Oskar). However, this attraction proves to be unrequited and utterly futile as the object of his desire is depicted throughout as utterly heterosexual.

Tackling the subject of homosexuality in Korea has also tended to court controversy. For instance, in 2011 a sixty-minute KBS single play drama entitled The Daughters of Club Bilitis portrayed three generations of lesbians including teenage, thirty something and fifty-something couples. It was heavily criticized for its subject-matter with the broadcaster responding by making the catch-up service for the drama unavailable (Hankyoreh 21). In 2014 It’s OK It’s Love, a series by SBS (Seoul Broadcasting System), featured an episode in

which a female doctor on a psychiatric ward says in passing, in reference to a transsexual patient, that homosexuality is simply a sexual preference or choice. This was perceived in some quarters as a statement that condoned homosexual love, despite the drama having no central gay characters. A group calling themselves khTV¹¹ 7000 People Committee held a demonstration in front of the SBS building protesting the expression of such perceived pro-gay sentiment in television drama (The Kyunghyang Shinmun). In 2015 JTBC (Joongang Tongyang Broadcasting Corporation), a non-subscription national cable channel, broadcast the drama Seonam Girls' High School Investigators and this was also condemned, this time for screening a lesbian kiss. The KOCSC (Korean Communication Standards Commission) issued a “warning” in March 2015 on the grounds that it adjudged the drama to have broken its codes of conduct. The organization censured the inclusion of the scene on the grounds of immorality, indecency, sexual content and its harmful influence on Korea’s youth. The report stated that while many of the organization’s members did not necessarily object to homosexuality, the particular scene was especially problematic because it featured kissing between two high-school girls, included a zoom in on the kiss, and that the kiss lasted over one minute. They concluded that the scene encouraged homosexuality among teenagers.

The problem for the KOCSC was, they stated, not the fact that homosexuality was shown but rather lay in the attitude adopted towards it (Media Today). It would seem from their reasoning, therefore, that the depiction of homosexuality requires careful monitoring, censoring or occasional outright censoring in cases where it might offer “encouragement.” Such concerns and moral panics over television drama’s attempts to engage with gay life in Korea in any “authentic” way reveals just how genuinely courageous Life is Beautiful was in portraying a homosexual relationship over such a length of time, especially when it is taken into consideration that that their love for and attraction towards each other is not avoided and they occasionally touch and kiss. That such representation was a much needed corrective was

publically recognized when Kim Soo-hyeon received the Rainbow Human Rights Award for her “realistic depiction of the life of homosexuals in Korea” in December 2010 from the Korean Sexual-Minority Culture and Rights Center (KSCRC). Two years later in 2012 Jeong Seon Kim conducted audience research on the public response to the drama’s depiction of homosexuality and found it to have raised awareness and increased discussion about the issues facing sexual minorities in Korean society, concluding that female audience members had proven more receptive to the ideas of tolerance put forward in the drama than male audience members (119).

However, any such acceptance was a particularly hard commodity to come by at the time of Life is Beautiful’s production. In the script it was planned for Tae-sup and Kyung-soo to get married and their wedding scene actually began filming in a catholic church. However, when the church realized that it was a gay marriage being shot on its premises it withdrew its permission for any further use of the location. The concerned network then demanded the marriage be removed from the story altogether. Kim Soo-hyeon, the writer, voiced her displeasure via twitter, saying “I feel like my face has just been rubbed with a dirty wet cloth. The drama’s timing and flow have all been messed up...” (The Hankyoreh 25 October 2010). Yet this proved to be only the beginning. On 29th September 2010 Joseon-ilbo (A35), Korea’s bestselling daily newspaper (The Korea Audit Bureau of Circulations 2010; 2012), printed an advertisement placed by a right-wing activist group under the headline “SBS will take responsibility when my son, who has turned gay after watching Life is Beautiful, dies from AIDS”. It made several wild claims including a statistic that “Homosexuals have 730 times more chance to get AIDS.” It asserted that “Homosexuality is not something you are born with, but is learned and spread through cultural and environmental elements” and continued by stating that “The Equal Opportunities Act will result in citizens who speak out against homosexuality receiving a maximum two years jail sentence and a 10,000,000 won [\$8,700]

fine as punishment” and that “SBS has been deleting complaints on their website in order to manipulate the general public.” A couple of weeks later Joong-Ang Daily reported that the Korean Ministry of Justice had decided to ban the drama from being shown in prisons. The Broadcasting Company, Borami, which under the direction of the Korea Correctional Services is responsible for television content in Korean prisons, had been showing Life is Beautiful every Wednesday since April 2010 but ended its screening of the drama on Wednesday 4th August. It was reported that the Ministry of Justice found the drama unsuitable for the ethos of the correctional broadcasting service as it placed a greater focus on homosexuality than was initially proposed at the production stage.

As well as being criticized for going too far, the drama also received some criticism, following its broadcast, for not going far enough. Despite portraying acceptance of homosexuality as an essential aspect of human kindness and family love rather than an affliction, Lee Sun-ok (2010) argued that the drama adhered to the family drama formula too much, to the extent that homosexuality was kept within the family entirely and actually became a family secret. Lee reasoned that, while still a progressive move, in order to address the issue of intolerance head on the series needed to depict Tae-sup coming out of the closet publically rather than him continuing to hide his sexuality from his work colleagues and society as a whole, which he does throughout the series. Seo Yeon Jo (2012) voiced a similar objection, arguing that an opportunity was missed as the gay characters become just other quirky members of an eccentric extended family that already has within it divorcees, widows, extra-marital affairs, mature marriages, step-mothers and fathers, half-brothers and sisters and so on. He further argued that the family in Life is Beautiful very quickly accept that their eldest son is gay and that Kyung-soo will become “son’s husband” (meaning that he will be a member of the family) only because the family clearly has a heterosexual second son as a backup. Once the family acknowledges that their first son is gay, they quickly make it their

mission to get their second son married to a suitable woman as quickly as possible to ensure the production of grandchildren who will continue the family name.

Another clear limitation to the drama is that both Tae-sup and Kyung-soo sometimes give way to jealousy, with this jealousy incongruously arising from their partner displaying feelings for women, usually female ex-partners from their pasts. They have no gay friends, no other gay characters feature in the drama and there is no sense of a wider gay community that they are in contact with (although gay nightclubs are briefly mentioned in episode 57 while they are having a lover's tiff following a female's attempt to seduce Kyung-soo).

In spite of such clear drawbacks, however, the drama does at the very least endeavor to present Tae-sup and Kyung-soo's relationship as genuine and loving. In episode 10, Kyung-soo's mother shouts at her son in anger "can't you be normal," but in the drama she is revealed to be unable to recognize her own son who is portrayed as entirely "normal" throughout. To underscore this normality, in the same episode Tae-sup is shown washing up in Kyung-soo's apartment after a busy day. After tidying up the kitchen, Tae-sup goes into the bedroom to find Kyung-soo fast asleep. Tae-sup quietly sits down next to him, touches his shoulder tenderly and looks lovingly at his tired face. Such quiet incidents serve to reinforce the strength of the relationship between them, and because such minor instances of affection recur again and again throughout the series, the strength of the relationship and the benefits both derive from it stand in stark contrast to gay characters depicted in previous dramas like Sad Temptation. Furthermore, rather than being overly romanticized, it becomes apparent that their relationship is as routine and grounded in the ordinary and humdrum as anybody's everyday life.

While Lee Sun-ok and Seo Yeon Jo's criticisms of the series are valid, one can perhaps sympathize with the writer for making the decision not to have Tae-sup come out publically. Dramatically Life is Beautiful places its focus on exploring how a Korean comes out to his

family and portrays how a family can then privately come to terms and become closer still following such a revelation, even when surrounded by widespread social intolerance. It also offers multi-faceted reactions with Tae-sub and Kyung-soo facing both support and abuse from different family members and in doing so dramatically visualizes what Seo Dong-Jin describes as the “dread” of “coming out” to family members that exists in Korea.

[Although] homosexuals may find it relatively easy to come out among their peers, at school or work, etc., they would never think of coming out in front of their families.

This can be credited to the strong psychological bonds that exist between parents and children and the fact that these bonds are reinforced in Korea’s family-based society ...

Indeed, most Korean homosexuals consistently see family as the biggest problem troubling them. Moreover, they see the discovery of their homosexual identity by their family as the greatest possible calamity threatening their future. More than society’s hatred and prejudice, these homosexuals fear the anxiety and stress that would result from the breaking of their familial bond (77).

The “anxiety and stress” Seo Dong-Jin refers to is certainly present in the drama as Tae-sup’s coming out to his family threatens to break the family apart and exclude him from it. Byung-gul, Tae-sup’s uncle, is particularly intolerant, repeatedly calling the couple “dirty bastards” (see episodes 23 and 24) and he refuses to sit at the dinner table with them (episode 24). As a result Tae-sup’s parents decide to get him a place to live in the city centre to escape this abuse and the family turmoil his admission has caused. Yet in spite of all of this discord they are never “outed” by any family member, the family ultimately remains together and they never have to deal with broader public scorn, this latter plot element Lee Sun-ok taking particular issue with in his criticism of the drama. Kim Soo-hyeon, however, defended her decision to keep it all in the family by admitting that she just did not have the heart to put her

gay characters through the cruelty and trauma of ridicule and social exclusion that they would have inevitably faced had they come out publicly (Korea Daily).

Dramatically, Kim's presentation of a kind-hearted and decent, compassionate couple, afraid to reveal themselves to a narrow-minded society, certainly points out the price gay citizens pay living in a homophobic Korea. To display their discomfort at the harassment and discrimination in the workplace that would have inevitably followed public knowledge of their relationship could have made a bold statement, but it would also have potentially shifted the focus away from the family dynamics to broader social ones. The dangers of coming out publically in Korea are actually addressed in the drama through Kyung-soo's backstory, which provides a salutary lesson of the potential consequences of doing so. In Seoul, his family was torn apart when he made his sexuality public, with his sister requiring psychiatric treatment and his father having a heart attack following the revelation and the social pressures that followed.

The family focus of Life is Beautiful and the commune-like existence the Yangs enjoy actually enables the large family structure to serve as a microcosm of Korean society. It displays within it an array of attitudes towards Tae-sup and Kyung-soo ranging from complete intolerance to unquestioning support and understanding. While providing this representational function, the unconventional family is also ultimately revealed as exceptional in its ability to transform, learn and grow, resulting in a view of an alternative and more considerate version of society being offered that could be achieved if attitudes were to change.

Unfortunately, and perhaps predictably, despite all of its merits the drama itself has been kept in a Korean "closet" following its broadcast in 2010. In order to view the series in full for this article, some episodes had to be watched with English subtitles on YouTube (the Video on Demand service accessible on the SBS official website (www.sbs.co.kr) could have

been used, but this is not subtitled) in combination with some DVDs recorded off-air (with imperfect, added subtitles) purchased from a seller on eBay. To this day, the series remains “officially” contained within Korea as there is no DVD version available to buy with foreign subtitles. On one website, YesAsia, there is a reference to a DVD box set being produced in 2011 with Mandarin subtitles for Taiwan, but this has long been “out of print.” Without existence in the DVD ancillary market, which ordinarily sells Korean dramas throughout Asia and the world, Life is Beautiful has been significantly impeded from being seen overseas through “official” channels.

Unofficially, Life is Beautiful has enjoyed some limited overseas exposure. In addition to fans putting English subtitled episodes on YouTube and individual retailers selling bootlegged DVDs with customized subtitles online, one fan (user name rimi512) has edited the drama into a truncated version consisting of 27 parts with just the gay storyline (Life is Beautiful: Gay Themed). Such efforts from enthusiasts and the fact that one has to seek the drama out through private or illegitimate means might justify labeling Life is Beautiful a cult drama now, prevented as it has been from becoming a Hallyu one. As it has been pieced back together again in various different forms by fans for international consumption, there exist today various unauthorized, semi-pirated versions to fill the void left by the inaccessible original. While this reveals much about fan and entrepreneurial practices within contemporary global online television culture as well as the rescue acts that can be achieved by drama enthusiasts,¹² the “underground” and “illegal” existence Life is Beautiful now has also offers an apt metaphor for the response an intolerant society has had to its longest-running drama to date about homosexuality.

Every single episode of Life is Beautiful creatively ends with a character falling over followed by a freeze frame over which the credits roll. The drama itself, like such final scenes, has remained frozen in time, contained within its moment of initial broadcast. Domestically

important, ideologically challenging, internationally insignificant and hitherto excised from the history of Hallyu drama, this skillfully crafted and sumptuous series adeptly deconstructed the constructed vision of a heterosexual and glamourized Korea that has proven, and continues to prove, so profitable and so seductive an advertisement for the country overseas. Whether Life is Beautiful could have gone further, been braver or more authentic or not - and it did sidestep some important issues - it is still tremendously important and valuable for being the serial drama that brought homosexuality itself out of the closet in Korean drama even if it has, regrettably, been put firmly back in there again – for now.

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¹ Some have adjudged there to be a second Korean Wave (Korean Wave 2.0) currently underway to account for the popularity of K-Pop driving the Korean Wave as distinct from drama. See Ono and Kwan (2005). Dal Yong Jin uses the term “Hallyu 2.0” to suggest that the Korean Wave is a more global phenomenon now than “Hallyu 1.0” which was largely defined by cultural flows across Asia (2012) and is more targeted at youth than families (2016). Sangjoon Lee and Abé Mark Nornes define Hallyu 2.0 as a phenomenon dependent on the new age of social media and other communication technologies for its success. Hallyu 3.0 is also being used in some quarters to describe the promotion of other aspects of Korean culture overseas such as contemporary dance and fine art (Hye-BKyoung Lee).

² See, for example, Cho, Chua, Chua and Iwabuchi. For a recent exception to this trend and a discussion of the impact of Hallyu beyond Asia see Marinescu.

³ For a discussion of the importance of foreign success on the public perception of Hallyu drama within Korea see Jeongmee Kim (2007).

⁴ See, for example, Mōri, Han, Hanaki et al., Hayashi and Chae.

⁵ See, for example, Suk-Young Kim, Chung and also Dennison.

⁶ For a discussion of the importance placed upon the exportability of Korean drama within Korea see Jeongmee Kim (2014).

⁷ For example, Hyun Mee Kim suggests that Hallyu drama transformed the Taiwanese perception of South Korea from an “impoverished country” into one containing “material brilliance” (193). Sang-Yeon Sung goes so far as to assert that this positive image “provided an opportunity for Taiwan and Korea to build positive relationships” following the breakdown of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992 (44). Millie Creighton argues that it also initiated a “positive shift in attitudes towards Korea” (10) in Japan.

⁸ See also Sang-Min Lee.

⁹ The drama was initially planned to run for 50 episodes but whilst being broadcast the decision was taken to extend this to 63 episodes. (*Asia Economy*).

¹⁰ “Korea, Sparkling” is the Korean Tourism Organization’s slogan that was widely used between 2007 and 2009 (it was changed to “Korea Inspiring” in 2010). “Dynamic Korea” is a slogan that has been in popular use since Korea co-hosted the world cup in 2002. “Korea, Sparkling” is commonly used by the tourism industry to embody “the lively energy of the Korean people and culture, which you are sure to experience while traveling in Korea.” (Korea Tourism Organization).

¹¹ khTV (Korea & Hope TV) is a Christian internet based broadcasting service that campaigns actively against homosexuality and gay marriage. See: www.khtv.org (in Korean)

¹² For discussions of how online fans circulate and engage with East Asian television drama see Islam and also Lukács.